Global education, global values? Chinese students’ experience of learning in Multicultural groups: a case study.

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ABSTRACT
With the globalisation of education, tertiary educators are reconsidering the value base of their programmes. Education is itself a cultural process and has overtly in the content, and implicitly, in the way it is delivered, reflected the dominant cultural values of the immediate environment. With globalisation these values can no longer be assumed as a given. What response can educators make? Continue to teach in one specified cultural context, consider all value systems, seek out universal values, develop value-free programmes.

This paper presents a case study which illustrates and discusses these questions. It describes a two-part research project involving students from nineteen cultures in a tertiary communication course. With this extremely wide range of culture, a multicultural approach to classroom learning is inevitable but it is also seen as preparing students for rapidly globalising world. The students worked in culturally diverse project groups for six weeks. The author was interested to understand how the different cultural groups perceived this experience.

Part One of the study showed that most students’ comfort level with working in culturally diverse groups shifted significantly by the end of the six-week experience, however, those who identified themselves as Chinese were the only group who made no significant shift in the comfort level.

In Part Two, the students’ reflective evaluations on the group process were analysed to answer the question: “Why was the experience of group work not as comfortable for Chinese students as the other students?”

These results show one important issue for Chinese students was the extent to which conflict was dealt with. The Chinese students also expressed a desire for a different kind of learning. The paper raises issues for future research, particularly about how group work is taught and facilitated in multicultural classrooms.
1. BACKGROUND
Over the past decade years the racio-ethnic and cultural mix in our tertiary class rooms, as in New Zealand's workforce has rapidly become more diverse. The 107 students the Communication paper in this study, includes students from many cultural groups including New Zealand Pakeha, New Zealand Maori, Chinese, a large group of international students including Bangladeshi and Indian, Fiji Indian, Tongan, Burmese, Samoan, Korean, Iranian, Filipino, Cook Islands, Solomon Islands, South Africa, and several others. As well, there is great diversity in age, and also in length, levels and country of education. The students range from school leavers to graduates of overseas degree programmes. The ratio of female to male is approximately two to one.

The members of the teaching team see one of their main roles as preparing students for the workplace. Today this means preparing students to communicate in a multicultural workplace and diverse society, in a rapidly globalising world. Alongside this diversity in the workplace there is an emphasis on working in teams to create synergy. Therefore these students were required to cooperate in groups to produce assignments and these groups were deliberately set up to be diverse in culture, background and age, rather than homogeneous. At the same time students are taught the theory and skills of group processes and intercultural communication. In this paper this group assignment involves a group presentation followed, three weeks later by a group report and an individual reflection on the group process.

In order create the necessary motivation to encourage interdependence, every member is given the same group mark for the group presentation and report, although the individual reflection receives an individual mark. As is discussed in the literature review it is believed diverse workgroups produce better results than homogenous groups, over time, and the negative effects of diversity decrease over time. Therefore the groups are set up to function over a relatively long period of time, seven weeks. The teaching seeks to foster a climate where differences were seen as positive allowing time for this process to develop. However while some students found this situation satisfying and rewarding many students still found it very challenging and difficult. This difference in experience seemed to correspond to differences in cultural groups. In particular, in the author’s observation the students who identify themselves as Chinese, often found the group experience particularly challenging. Although the groups they were in produced high quality group outcomes, these students often expressed discomfort with the group process and identified the level of cultural diversity as a particular problem. This research was to understand how these Chinese students perceive this group experience, if indeed they found it more difficult and why.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
The approach to group work taken in our classrooms is supported by the literature which shows that diverse work groups produce better quality outcomes by increasing the opportunity for creativity and achieving outcomes consistent with the external environment (Hoffman & Maier, 1961. Cox, Lobel & McLeod, 1991. McLeod & Lobel,1992. Cox 1993. , Lawrence & Lorsch, 1969. Ancona & Caldwell, 1988). Better outcomes are achieved by bringing broader perspectives and a greater pool of
solutions, more innovative ideas and a greater variety of criteria to evaluate solutions (Cox, 1993, Knouse & Chretien, 1996, and Milliken and Martins, 1996). Diversity should also allow group members to take on a variety of tasks and roles (Northcroft, Polzer, Neale & Kramer, 1995).

At the same time, diversity may have a detrimental effect on group performance, because the group members may perceive that they lack the similarities and commonalities required for cohesion. (Mullen & Copper, 1994). In addition individual members of a diverse work group may focus on subgroup identities and may direct exclusionary communications and even open bias towards others who are not in their own subgroup (Larkey, 1996). Diversity may create mixed and confusing expectations among members, distorted attributions of group effectiveness, differential power distributions, intragroup conflict and accommodation of minority perspectives into the majority view. (Karakowsky & Seigal, 1995. McGrath, Berdahl & Arrow, 1995) and groups may break into subgroups. (Lau & Murnighan, 1998). Thus diversity also carries with it the possibility that group members will be dissatisfied and fail to identify with the group and all students needed to feel "comfortable and culturally safe" (Kohlhase, 1996) in order to learn effectively.

Research shows that the major factors determining whether diverse groups have positive or negative outcomes are reward systems, institutional environment, and time together as a group.

**Reward systems**
Situations that threaten challenge or reward the work group in its entirety create work group identity and allow members to consider each other's individual characteristics. These factors are more likely to be present when group tasks and rewards create interdependence (Neuberg, 1987). Basing rewards on the performance of individual group members exacerbates competition along diversity lines: group-oriented rewards refocus attributions of group members toward group effectiveness rather than individual success. (Karakowsky & Siegal, 1995). Therefore the assessments of group tasks in this case were given as one group mark to all members.

**Institutional environment**
The organisational environment also determines whether outcomes are positive or negative for diverse work groups. Where the expression of cultural ways of thinking and working is encouraged rather than repressed, differences within diverse work groups are appreciated (Cox, 1993. Goldberg, 1993, Levine and Moreland, 1995). In such an environment cultural identity is seen as an attribute of the individual that can provide new perspectives and positive contributions to the work group. Behaviour of others is less likely to be linked with negative stereotyped interpretations of ability, status or character, if there is some understanding of their culture (Ferdman and Cortes, 1992).

**Time**
Culturally diverse groups are more likely than culturally homogenous groups to produce better outcomes over time. Also some studies show over time the negative effects of diversity such as lower group affiliation and dissatisfaction with group process, will erode. (Watson, Kumar and Michealson 1993). Therefore it was vital to give the students a long-term experience of interacting in heterogeneous work groups.
if this experience was to be positive and the best possible outcomes were to be obtained (O'Reilly, Caldwell & Barnett, 1989. Tsui, Egan and O'Reilly, 1992.) Some groups however did not to achieve much satisfaction with the group process over time.

An explanation for this dissatisfaction can be found in a new direction for redefining diversity a recent study that differentiates surface-level diversity (demographic and physical characteristics) from deep-level diversity (attitudes, beliefs and values) in terms of group dynamics. (Harrison, Price & Bell, 1998). Harrison et al. found that as the time increased that group members worked together, the effects of surface-level diversity decreased and, whereas the effects of deep-level diversity increased. Thus, in time, the development of interpersonal relationships will overcome surface discomfort members may feel from differences in age, gender, race etc. Also through the process of synergy the different perspectives will create better quality ideas and outcomes.

3. RESEARCH RATIONALE

Much of the research so far much concentrates on the positive effect of different perspectives on group tasks such as idea generation and problem solving, but, if these different perspectives include different values and beliefs that relate directly to the group process, such as values and beliefs concerning conflict management and leadership, although the group may be effective in producing the group product, the process may be a very uncomfortable one for some members. If the norms of the group process as set by a dominant culture (i.e. the New Zealand educational system) are at odds to the underlying deeply held cultural values, then the diversity is at a deep level and will increase even though interpersonal relationships will develop.

The aim of this research therefore was find out if the comfort level with diversity in the group increases over time for the different culture groups, particularly the Chinese students. The term ‘comfort level’ was chosen rather than ‘satisfaction’ with the group because, a student may be satisfied with the outcome of the group uncomfortable with the interpersonal relationships. Other terms such as ‘satisfaction’ suggest a judgement of the ‘comfort’ connects the student with his/her own basic feelings during the group process.

The norms for group work, that were espoused as during the teaching of the theory, as necessary for effective group process and repeated in the student’s textbook, are based in Western beliefs about the nature of effective communication and group behaviour. They rely heavily on an egalitarian but somewhat individualistic approach to the group process. The teacher/lecturer was seldom expected not to interfere directly in the group process. Appointing a leader is discouraged, leadership was to be seen as behaviour rather than a person, and shared or distributed leadership was encouraged Although the rewards are awarded as a whole, each member was expected to be individually responsible for contributing to the group processes such as establishing norms and maintaining a balance of task and relationship maintenance behaviours. Also consensus style decision-making was expected and assertive communication was encouraged to deal with interpersonal conflict and destructive behaviours, such as withdrawing, and a process of constantly negotiating meaning using reflection enquiry and advocacy was held up as the ideal. (Chase et al. 1999).
Difference in comfort with the group process could be linked to differences in cultural values and beliefs with the group theory described. Three of the main dimensions of cultural values identified by Hofstede (1984) are relevant; collectivist versus individualistic social orientation, power orientation and goal orientation. These dimensions are discussed in relationship to cultural norms of New Zealand pakeha, the dominant culture in terms of numbers in the groups and setting, and the Chinese cultural group, the main subject of this research.

The New Zealand pakeha culture (the dominant culture in terms of numbers) is individualistic in orientation there will tension due to this cultural value. Although such group projects would seem to be suited to cultures with collectivist values, such as Pacific/Asian cultures, the group process described above in many ways is individual process. Firstly although the group gains one group mark, this mark ultimately is recorded on the individual’s academic record. Also, though understanding of group goals is encouraged as part of the norm building process, stating of individual goals is also expected.

Another cultural value that would seem to be likely to create tension is power distance relations. A student, with Chinese cultural values high in power respect, would be more comfortable with teacher-centred education or leader-centred groups. The student with high power tolerance values, such as the New Zealand educated student, will be more comfortable with a student-centred approach, group work and equal status group members.

The third value is that of goal orientation. At one extreme passive goal behaviour emphasises relationships and resolution of conflict by compromise, academic failure is seen as a minor problem, assertiveness is ridiculed, and underselling yourself encouraged. Aggressive goal behaviour involves the opposite extreme. The New Zealand pakeha culture fits in to the dimension of moderately aggressive goal behaviour. The Chinese culture has the paradox of high emphasis on achievement but rejection of self-assertion, competitiveness and selling yourself.

Related these dimensions identified above, other cultural values and beliefs about conflict management strategies, a recurring difficulty in the group process would seem to be very relevant to analysis of comfort level. It is widely held that Asian forms of collectivism place pressure in individuals to avoid disagreements of any kind (Barnlund, 1989; Chua & Gudykunst, 1987; Leung, 1987; Leung & Iwakawi, 1998; Leung & Lind 1986; Trubisky et al 1991; Wheeler, Reis and Bond 1989). Tinsley (1998) identifies strategies by which different cultures manage conflict (in Ury et al 1993). The deferring to status power model, which means that those with high status have the power to create and enforce the resolution of conflict. In cultures with high power respect as the Chinese culture (Hofstede, 1980) such a conflict resolution model would prevail. However in the work groups studied there was no leader and little involvement with the high status figure, the teacher.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
To determine if the Chinese students' comfort level with the group process in culturally diverse work groups shifted positively over time
To compare this shift with the shift in comfort level of students of other cultures in the same groups
To determine if there are aspects of the Chinese students’ comfort level with the group process which are related to differences in their underlying cultural values and values of other members
To determine if these differences in underlying cultural values are positive or negatives influences on comfort level of Chinese students with group processes.
To identify ways to make the group process a more comfortable experience for Chinese students of all cultural groups.

Other objectives
To identify ways to make the group process a more satisfying experience for students of all cultural groups.
To encourage all students to reflect on their experience.

5. METHODOLOGY
5.1 Discussion of methodology

In designing the methodology several general principles were followed:

A subjective approach was chosen, in particular phenomenological approach i.e. the focus is in the meaning structure of the lived in experience: that is the meaning an aspect of reality takes on for the people studied.

Directed questions have been used to test some basic hypotheses, i.e. that comfort level shifts over time but not to the same degree for all cultures. Other questions deliberately kept open to allow the subjects to describe what was important in their experience. However there will be necessarily some unconscious cultural bias, as established by the context and previous teaching (see 5.1.2 below)

This is a case study approach rather than an experiment, unlike many of the other studies mentioned in the literature. However unlike many some other case studies, there was some indirect control of the process by the researcher, by input into the design and teaching of theory on the course. This means that it is anticipated that students’ responses were likely to reflect some common ‘mental models’ created by teaching and received theory base. This effect has limitations in that it may limit the kind and scope of information, but advantages in that the qualitative information gathered will be more easily categorised into themes and these themes related to cultural values.

Also the findings could be said to be more generalisable to the work force than other experiments because for the students this was real work, in groups where the outcomes mattered, with real rewards that were significant to them.

5.2. Context
This study involves students from four different classes. They each followed the same programme. They were assigned to diverse groups and each group was given a task of researching and presenting a communication topic as a group. They had two weeks to complete this process.

A few weeks later the students were assigned to different but equally diverse groups. These groups had the task of researching and presenting a written report on some business or social issue e.g. setting up a business in South Auckland.

5.3 Instruments
5.3.1 Questionnaire
At the end of the seven-week group report process, a questionnaire (see appendix 1) was given out in class to all students and collected by the researcher.

The analysis compared the students’ perception of diversity in the first group with the second group to see if the students’ perceptions of the level of diversity and comfort level with this diversity.

These qualitative responses from the survey were analysed for themes. They were intended to provide a summary of the main themes as related to positive or negative experiences which may or may not be reinforced the reflective evaluations.

5.3.2. Reflective evaluation
As well as the data gathered from this survey, qualitative data was gathered from the individual student reflection on the group process students write at the end of the course. (see appendix 3). These evaluations gave longer more in-depth comments on the students’ group experience. Unmarked copies of these were kept by all tutors, identified only by I.D. number. Analysis concentrated on the responses of Chinese students only, after consent was obtained.

The evaluations were analysed for main themes. Positive and negative experiences as related to the above processes were identified and possible relationships between cultural values discussed.

5.4. Limitations
The scope is limited to of the Chinese students and linking these experiences to their cultural values. Contrast and comparison is then made to the values of the dominant culture i.e. NZ Pakeha, in particular in how they are represented in the expectations of ‘good’ group process. The underlying assumption kind of cultural analysis is that cultural values cannot be identified without comparison to another. The danger of this that one culture will be represented as right and the other as wrong or divergent.

Also such analysis inevitably involves stereotyping and attributing cultural characteristics to students as a group. There are many other factors influencing their experience, individual differences, age, education, work experience etc and these will need to be acknowledged.
6. FINDINGS

6.1. PART ONE

6.1.1 Perceptions of diversity by the group as a whole
Figure 1 shows that the students perceived themselves to be in diverse groups but the report group, which began midway through the course, appeared to them to be less diverse than their oral presentation group. The members of the class did not change which means the level of diversity did not change. Possibly the process of the interaction with the other students in the first group led them to be more likely to perceive group members as individuals with whom they had something in common rather than members of another culture group.

Figure 1

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>response</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not diverse</td>
<td>1 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some diversity</td>
<td>40 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very diverse</td>
<td>48 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extreme diversity</td>
<td>17 12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.1.2. Perceptions of diversity by different culture groups
These perceptions of diversity differed among the three major culture groups represented in our classes, the Pakeha New Zealanders, the Indian and the Chinese students. Figure 2 shows a means analysis of the perception of diversity of these three culture groups in their oral presentation and report groups. All three culture perceived a high level of diversity, however the Pakeha group perceived the highest level of diversity. By the second group the Pakeha group had made a significant shift of 10% towards perceiving their groups as less diverse while the other groups did not make statistically significant shifts. Some in each of these two later groups did not perceive their groups as slightly more diverse. Perhaps the Pakeha groups now saw themselves as having more in common with other nationalities.
6.1.3. Comfort levels with diversity for the group as a whole

Figures 3 and 4 show the comfort levels at the beginning and end of both oral and report groups. **Figure 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>response</th>
<th>frequency</th>
<th>Start</th>
<th>End</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>very uncomfortable</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>little uncomfortable</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quite comfortable</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very comfortable</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The means analysis shows that the students comfort level with diversity rose about 10% over the life of each group. Working in heterogeneous groups therefore can be said to be a positive experience for these students. This is reinforced by their written comments.

6.1.4. Comfort level with diversity by culture group
We also analysed whether this change in comfort level was the same for all the three major culture groups. Figures 5 and 6 show a means analysis for the change in comfort level from start to end of oral presentation and report groups.
The Bangladeshi and Pakeha group show a statistically significant increase in comfort level. In both group situations the Chinese students had a lower overall comfort level and though they show a shift in comfort level between the beginning and end of the groups, it is not significant and there are some who become more uncomfortable.
Therefore it can be concluded that the group-building process was not as satisfactory for the Chinese students as for the other groups.

An analysis of the brief responses in the questionnaire revealed that for these students the positives of group work were communication, team spirit, sharing of ideas, and co-operation. The negatives were lack of useful norms, lack of leadership, unequal contribution or commitment, conflict, cultural issues and time management.

The reflective evaluations of several Chinese students were then analysed for themes and a summary of results follows in Part Two.

6.2 PART TWO

6.2.1 Group A:
This group which reflected most nearly the composition of the groups in the previous study had one Chinese member and four others who were new immigrants of other cultures.

The Chinese member of the group indicated in the questionnaire that her experience in the group was not a very positive one. She commented negatively on time management and destructive roles being played. In her reflection, she said that at times she felt they were doing an “individual report rather than a group one” because of the presence of a “criticiser” in the group, “which made everyone feel uncomfortable.”

However she also said that “sometimes the group agreed with each other too quickly”... “just avoiding conflict” and this “inhibited the flow of ideas creative ideas.” She concluded that in the future the group should “focus on assignment quality not relationships” and felt, in the end, she had learned “something about overcoming conflict in a group.” She also commented again, in the reflection, on the importance of time management.

The member of the group, who had been longest in New Zealand, whom the others nominated as the leader, reported positively about the experience. He believed “everyone had a good time” and therefore the process had been successful, that everyone had been involved in leadership and that there had been some conflict resolution through “compromise.”

Of the other students, one commented negatively in the questionnaire about the authoritarian leadership. In the reflection he said that “the group cohesion was not strong, and reported that differences of opinion were solved by “majority vote” where everyone “was obliged to go along with the majority.” He attributed this lack of cohesion to the fact that they all had not much experience in groups. The other two members found the group experience generally positive. One felt that conflict and aggression had been “dealt with” but gave no description as to how. The other was happy to have someone she described as a “monopoliser”... “take charge.”
Conflict management and resolution seems to have been an issue in this group. It seems to have been a group where decisions were made by authoritarian leadership or a win/lose resolution such as voting or compromise.

The Chinese student recognises that the conflict management was not satisfactory and this probably affected their final product which she was not happy with. She also seems to indicate why this happened: the “discomfort” everyone felt with disagreement. This is not an uncommon feeling, but she is the only member who expresses it in the reflection. She also indicates she has learned, possibly through the teaching of theory near the end of the group experience, how better to deal with the conflict in the future. Her comment that she would focus “less on relationships” perhaps indicates that she would be prepared to experience the discomfort of disagreement for longer.

6.2.2. Group B:
This group had three members who defined themselves as identifying with the Chinese culture, and one other female student who had been in New Zealand less than two years.

In the questionnaire the non-Chinese student indicated that the group experience had not been a positive one. In the reflection she described how the group had established an explicit “norm that they all spoke English in group meetings”, but she “always arrived late for meetings” by which time the three other group members were speaking Chinese to each other. As a result, most of the time she “sat in silence” during meetings and felt “out of place”. She began to think it “not worth coming” and therefore “decided not to attend” at the point that the conclusions and recommendations of the report were being discussed and written.

She concludes that she should have reminded the other members about the group norm of speaking only in English, but because she was “frustrated” she “never bothered.” She believed that the group never reached the “norming” or “performing” stage of group development and the group was not as effective as “was expected”.

The other students, all Chinese indicated in the questionnaire that although they found the group experience more positive, all expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that all group members did not contribute equally. On reflection they all identified the presence of a “withdrawer” in the group and all in hindsight arrived at differing explanations for her absences. However, none of them identified the reason the “withdrawer” gave, that they were all speaking in Chinese and she felt isolated. They all suggested ways they should have dealt with the behaviour.

One member mentioned that they were “all focused on the goal” but then said the “withdrawer” slowed the group’s progress and they “lost time to write the report better.” Her conclusion was that the withdrawer was probably “not interested in the topic” and that they should have chosen a topic “in which every member is interested.” Another member described the withdrawer as “always” being absent. He concluded that the group should have used “effective persuasive methods to persuade
the withdrawer to participate.” He was also critical of the time management of some of the members of the group. The fourth group member said that the withdrawer “never came to group meetings, never worked on anything, and never apologised.” She concluded that the other group members “should have known that functional roles can overcome destructive behaviour” and “that everybody had a responsibility to help her and ensure that she contributes something to the group.” She also suggests that if she had known the group theory earlier they would have done this better.

The Chinese students would appear to have a positive experience in the group, however their comments indicate that their affiliation in the group as a whole was not as positive because of the presence of a withdrawer and the fact that this behaviour was not addressed satisfactorily. On reflection they seem to apply the theory and see that destructive behaviour in a group can be seen as group responsibility. In fact, they focused the responsibility for the withdrawing behaviour back on themselves, rather than blaming the person they were criticising. Perhaps this can be seen as a face saving approach. However their solutions did not suggest confronting the member about the behaviour or asking why she was withdrawing.

6.2.3. Group C:
This group had one recent-immigrant Chinese student, plus four students from other cultures (none New Zealand-born), three of whom were fluent English speakers, competent in the Kiwi educational environment. All students were female.

In her questionnaire responses this Chinese student spoke positively about having learned to overcome cultural barriers. She described the positive roles her group members had played “to create a good atmosphere. Thus we all felt free to speak up.” She reported that the other group members used active listening techniques to assist her expression. She felt the need for more time spent on relationships “needed more personal interaction to improve understanding...... We were too polite sometimes. Arguments were too little to produce new or creative ideas”. She acknowledged the existence at times of some destructive roles, but the group coped with these as “we therefore not only produced a good report, but also were quite satisfied with each other”.

Her group members also described a balance of roles in the group, with the constructive ones outweighing the negative ones. They acknowledged the presence of a member who contributed less, but they took the time to determine that the reason for this was her ill health and the pressures of other assignments, not a dissatisfaction with the group process. Two comments were made that in future they would speak out more firmly to ensure a fair sharing of the workload. A monopoliser was described as also being eager and hard working, so the group made allowances for her.

A number of factors could have influenced the generally positive experience of this Chinese student. The group was all female. There appears to have been fairly open communication and although they acknowledge that they did not deal ideally with negative behaviours, they were generally pleased with both the product and the process. Several of the students in this group were not under the extra pressures of difficulties with language and culture, which could have contributed to a less tense group environment, and these students had also taken time to help the Chinese student
to express herself. However, more relationship time would have made her feel more comfortable. She also observed, as did the Chinese student in group one, that too much politeness and too few arguments at times inhibited the flow of creative ideas.

6.2.4. Group D:
This group had one Chinese student, plus two recent immigrant students of other cultures, and two students with English as their first language as well as long experience of the New Zealand education environment.

In the questionnaire this Chinese student described learning to communicate with different group members and take on the responsibility of positive roles in the group. Her discussion of the stages her group went through show that all was not plain sailing as “there were many conflicts and disappointments”. She described her disagreement with another student over which of their material was the more important for inclusion in the report. They took much time discussing and interacting with each other and as a result they “attained some agreement.” Eventually they realised that both items were important. “Then we had the sense of belongingness to the group”. She expressed a wish that conflicts be resolved by a “win-win” approach, but it is not clear if this was generally practised in the group. She speaks of the need for time to discuss the different ideas raised by group members.

The other group members gave a fuller picture of some strong disagreements in the group over choice of topic and content of the report, but they also describe how “Listening and communication are the two things that helped us achieve our goals” and “.. we were able to keep all the channels of communication open..” One group member received praise for the ability to analyse issues and move the group forward. Another member commented that they should have taken more time at the beginning to get to know each other better, and this would have enhanced the speed of the process and the quality of the product.

The experience for this Chinese student was once again generally positive, possibly due to the open communication used to resolve the conflicts that arose. There appears to have been a strong group member who helped with this process. The need for time to discuss, resolve conflict and improve relationships was again a common theme.

6.2.5. Group E:
This group was interesting in that it was an all Chinese group of four males and one female who had been in New Zealand for approximately two years.

Dealing or not dealing with conflict was commented on by all five group members. The difficulties in addressing conflict openly were illustrated by one student’s example of letting someone talk too long and two members noticed others remaining silent in the storming stage when there was significant conflict over the report topic. It was “difficult to make compromise on issues.”

The observation that task roles were played more than maintenance roles was illustrated by meetings going on too long without a break. This suggests that in spite of some being aware of their individual needs they did not act assertively.
One student noted that some members “lost essential politeness” by shouting during the storming stage and went on to make the judgement that this was “very rude and hurt the member”.

Another student identified a conflict over time spent on the group work. They wanted members to spend more time on the report but others’ individual priorities meant that they “don’t like this.”

Positive behaviours were also identified by all five students and one student noted that when someone was late for a meeting rather than criticise them “we were concerned with the reasons for lateness and shared their problems”. Several students observed more than one member playing the harmoniser and supporter role to reduce conflict and avoid negative roles by “working to create a “co-operative, positive and conforming climate.” One observed that “we understood each others strengths and weaknesses” and that once they had got through the storming or griping stage “our group developed quickly … and made great progress on task because our group had settled its relationships”.

A theme that emerged was the students’ lack of previous knowledge and experience in group work and the useful connections they were now able to make by reflecting on their experience. By realising that they were moving through the stages of a group they were able to separate out the earlier disagreements in the storming stage when “members were discouraged” from later stages when “members began to enjoy the group and the group work” and “got on track” and “we realised that cohesiveness was important” so that they moved “forward efficiently” to achieve “great success with the group report”.

Two different comments were made about their new awareness by one student who observed that understanding the theory did not necessarily make group work easy. Although they knew that conflict would arise in the storming stage “it was worse than expected”; he summed up their learning with:

“if the performance is not good it is normal[at the storming stage]. Don’t worry about it, be patient. Otherwise you might make a mistake and produce a negative effect on the group.”

A student was perhaps acknowledging his learning and his dissatisfaction with his contribution by saying perhaps that if he had a chance to do the assignment again he would contribute more because group work will not be effective until “group members spend more time and energy on achieving goals and relationships.”

This group did not receive instruction about group processes before they began work in the group and one student commented that it would have been better if the theory had been taught first. Another commented:

“at first I thought the report was the aim of the lecturer. In fact, how to communicate with each other in a group is more important”.

The comment that this experience was “a chance to learn about group skills” and to co-operate with others in the group and play a positive role in the group” perhaps summed up their final satisfaction with the group and their report. It was also clear
that the experience of group work in particular conflict management was being thought about in new ways. The learning was new, challenging and there was discomfort with open disagreement.

CONCLUSION

Several issues emerge in this study about cultural influences on Chinese students’ experience in group work. The Chinese students often mentioned their lack of experience in reflecting on group work and the useful connections they made by reflecting on their experience in the light of theory. They particularly were interested in the idea that conflict was “normal” and that some disagreement is acceptable and necessary.

Learning by discovery and then backing up with theory is common practice in the New Zealand educational situation and is probably familiar to the New Zealand or New Zealand acculturated student, but possibly not to the Chinese students. Our Chinese students express, in reflection, a desire for a different kind of learning, progressing from theory and understanding, to practice. They seem to reveal in the reflection good ability to integrate theory with practice. Teaching the theory along with the experience, thereby giving the students new ways of thinking about such issues as conflict, may be more suitable for the Chinese students than “discovery learning.” Also encouraging reflection on experience in light of theory would seem to be a valuable process.

The extent to which conflict was dealt or not dealt with was the most frequently mentioned factor by the Chinese students for a positive group experience. When the students in the group were open about conflict and conflict was managed, the group was a positive experience. This tended to happen in groups of mainly New Zealand or New Zealand acculturated students. The Chinese students often describe observing the conflict or destructive behaviours happening but did not participating in the conflict or the conflict management. This suggests they would not be able to deal with conflict if they were responsible for its management. Therefore they would possibly benefit from practical exercises in managing conflict, to experience personally expressing disagreement, and experiencing extended discussion of issues through role-play, modelling etc.

Alongside these comments about conflict, were others which express; discomfort with disagreement, the belief that it was essential to maintain politeness at all times, and a reluctance to address destructive behaviour directly. The Chinese students also revealed that they were making their own analysis for the reasons for destructive behaviour, focusing responsibility on themselves. These reactions could be related to the Eastern value of saving ‘face’ or preserving the dignity of the other whose behaviour you are critical of. However, it was not necessarily a helpful approach in a multi-cultural situation for dealing with destructive behaviour. It would seem useful in this context to teach Chinese students the theory and the process of “checking out untested assumptions” (Argyris, 1985) with others.
Other cultural values, which seem to be represented in the Chinese students’ comments and could be seen as issues for them in group work, are the importance of apologising and value given to time management issues such as punctuality and deadlines. In the questionnaire ten students commented on this as an issue. Of the seven negative comments, five were from Chinese students. There were three positive comments, none from Chinese students. In the reflections several Chinese students also criticised other student’s time management.

This means that it could be important to spend time involving students in clarifying their different ideas and working together to develop strategies to enable the group to achieve its task, alongside the ability to retain their important cultural values.

Of course the conclusions above are result of generalising from the Chinese students’ comments, without a great deal of reference to other contributing factors such as age and past experience group members. However, by focusing specifically on the comments of Chinese students and the “discomforting” aspects of group work for them, this study has identified several implications for their future facilitation of groups.

Firstly it is important to teach theory, particularly the theory of conflict management, more contemporaneously with the group experience, and to give the students more opportunities, perhaps through role play exercises, to practise experiencing longer periods of disagreement and hopefully successful conflict resolution, through consensus. Also, teaching the theory of reflection on one’s own behaviour in a group and providing opportunities for the students to do this, seems to be a valuable. This includes opportunities for the students to practise testing out assumptions they make about others’ behaviour. Finally, more discussion throughout the group process to clarify values and beliefs, particularly on the value others give to time and politeness, should be encouraged.

It will be the subject of future research to assess the validity of these conclusions and the value of these suggestions.

REFERENCES


Ruderman (Eds.), Diversity in work teams: Research paradigms for the changing workplace. (pp.69-96). Washington, D.C. American Psychological Association


APPENDIX 1
This semester you have worked and completed assignments in two different groups. The first group (GROUP A) was the oral presentation group that you were in for two weeks.
The second group (GROUP B) was the report group that you were in for seven weeks.
I would like you to answer questions on each of these groups.

A. ORAL PRESENTATION GROUP (GROUP A):
For questions 1 –6 please circle the appropriate number:

1. Your groups were made up of many different people of different ethnic cultures.
How diverse, culturally, did you perceive the members to be?
all very similar 1--------------2--------------3--------------4very diverse

2. How comfortable were you with this level of cultural diversity at the beginning of the assignment?
very comfortable1--------------2--------------3--------------4very uncomfortable

3. How comfortable were you with this level of diversity at the end of the assignment?
very comfortable1--------------2--------------3--------------4very uncomfortable

B. REPORT GROUP (GROUP B)
4. How diverse, culturally, (in terms of different ethnic cultures) did you perceive the members of your second group, the report group?
all very similar 1--------------2--------------3--------------4very diverse

5. How comfortable were you with this level of cultural diversity at the beginning of the assignment?
very comfortable1--------------2--------------3--------------4very uncomfortable

6. How comfortable were you with this level of diversity at the end of the assignment?
very comfortable1--------------2--------------3--------------4very uncomfortable

7. What did you enjoy about this group experience? (use other side of the page if necessary)

8. What didn't you like or found difficult about working in this group?

9. Please give any other comments on your experience in groups

C. PERSONAL INFORMATION
10. Please tick the appropriate box:
[a] Age: 15-19 □ 20-24 □ 25-29 □ 30-34 □ 35-39 □ 40 and over □
[b] Sex: Male □ Female □
11. Which culture do you most identify with? e.g. NZ Maori, Fiji Indian, NZ pakeha etc.
12. In which country has most of your education taken place so far?
13. How many years of education have you had in New Zealand?
APPENDIX 2.

REFLECTIVE EVALUATION: Group Processes

(Textbook Ref: Chapter 12)

Two major products have resulted from your group's work over recent weeks, a written report and an oral presentation.

In producing these, a number of processes have taken place in the group. These processes will have involved:
1. establishing your purpose and group norms,
2. adopting roles that maintain a balance of task and relationship maintenance behaviours
3. sharing leadership
4. dealing with conflict
5. consensus style decision-making
6. clarifying meanings and understandings.
7. cross-cultural communication

Such processes may have occurred consciously or unconsciously. (See Chase et al. (1998) Effective Business Communication Chapter 12).

Assignment Task
You will be given four processes by your lecturers Use these to discuss how your group was helped or hindered in the tasks you were working on together. This will involve examining the interaction and relationships within the group that affected the way you worked together. You do not have to identify individuals in your reflection; you may refer to group members generally or as 'A', 'B' etc. It is important to reflect on your own behaviour during the group process.

1. Describe what you noticed happening in your group in terms of each process. Give specific examples.
2. Apply any relevant theory using your text or other sources.
3. Evaluate how your group performed and briefly discuss what you have learnt from your group experience about how groups work. What could be changed to allow your group to work more effectively?
## APPENDIX 3 - Demographic data

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